

PSALM
Edmund De Wall

International Symposium
The Library of Memory

Primo Levi, the Ghetto,
Exile, the Lager, and *The Periodic Table*

Murray Baumgarten
University of California, Santa Cruz

Design by Angela Thalls

Reading Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*

1. An Italian Jew Deploys a Yiddish Proverb
to Reframe a Western Cultural Stereotype

As he explores the continuing impact of personal and communal trauma in the post-war era, Primo Levi asks if it is possible to undo the stigma of the European age-old stereotyping of the Ghetto, which the murderous Nazi Lager multiplied and amplified horrendously into a cultural trope that branded the Jews.

Can words undo an age-old stereotype and vicious modern Holocaust trauma? Or rewrite the library of bitter memories that had been inscribed on him and his people?

Can words restore the Jews – the people defined as aliens –to full humanity and citizenship among the peoples and nations of Europe?

If you don't know Yiddish you aren't Jewish, Levi was told in Auschwitz.

Nevertheless, he begins *The Periodic Table* with a Yiddish Proverb: he had learned how important Yiddish – the exilic language of the Jews of Eastern Europe – is for the history of Jewish culture

He learned Yiddish only after his return to Turin. He needed Yiddish to interview the survivors streaming through Italy on their way to Israel where they would participate in the post-war struggle for Israeli independence.

The epigraph of *The Periodic Table* is a Yiddish proverb:

Iberkumene tsores iz gut tzu dertseylin

And Primo Levi immediately provides an Italian translation:

È bello raccontare i guai passati

In English translation:

Troubles overcome are good to tell

This is an oral account: you share in the understanding of what it means to tell *raccontare* the story. The Yiddish proverb is in the active present tense. Let us call it a narrative imperative.

In this language of every-day life the Jews in Exile fashioned a nimble idiom.

In Levi's phrasing we hear a definition of Jewish literature, which as Ruth Wisse has reminded us, is an oral conversation –
“Two Jews Talking.”

The Ancient Mariner, cherished by Primo Levi, talks and tells his story to anyone who will listen, and tells and retells his story.

Continuously open to Hebrew, religious, Biblical and intellectual dialectic, Yiddish was the language that helped these Jews survive as a people in Exile.

It was the vehicle that made it possible to imagine how they might answer the call of Psalm 137 – and even in a foreign land, at least hear the Lord's song.

I am reminded of Giuseppe Verdi's response in 1841, when he wrote “Va Pensiero,” the chorus of the Hebrew slaves in *Nabucco*, to the Italian libretto by Temistocle Solera.

It speaks of the lost homeland and the “*membranza si cara* – memories so dear,” – and still has a contemporary resonance in Italy today.

For me it also brings to mind that even today in speaking Yiddish, Jews reference their historic European homelessness.

This language of Jewish Exile yet offers a glimpse of how we might transform ancient homelessness into a modern Diasporic home.

In naming his installation, “Psalm,” Edmund De Waal situates it in the long story of Exile; and as the Library of Memory echoes the Psalmist's call, it makes room for Primo Levi's writing.

Production of Verdi's *Nabucco* – “Va, pensiero” – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUUVnJkcAM>

The Yiddish epigraph of *The Periodic Table* highlights the process of telling.

It is in the *telling* that the troubles *tzores* are now overcome. Their telling is continuous – an ongoing activity like study of Jewish texts, which is unending .

The Italian phrasing like the Yiddish proverb is emphatically in the present tense of the telling.

Telling and ReTelling the Shoah Stories

He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story, because so are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity. We tell them to each other in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, the Ukraine, and are simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?

The Learning Curve of *The Periodic Table*

2. Ancestors and Humiliation in the Coming of Age Story

The Periodic Table begins with the less than warm welcome granted the Jews in Piedmont.

Jews introduced the technology of making silk in southern Piedmont; they would not get beyond the status of an extremely tiny minority, never much loved or much hated. A wall of suspicion, of undefined hostility and mockery, must have kept them substantially separated from the rest of the population, even several decades after the emancipation of 1848.

On coming out of school my father's contemporaries used to mock him without malice, greeting him with the corner of their jackets gathered in their fists to resemble a donkey's ear and chanting, "Pig's ear, donkey's ear, give 'em to the Jew that's here."

The allusion to the ear is arbitrary, and the gesture was originally the sacrilegious parody of the greeting that pious Jews would exchange in synagogue when called up to read the Torah, showing each other the hem of the prayer-shawl whose tassels, minutely prescribed by ritual as to number, length and form, are replete with mystical and religious significance.

The passage telescopes his father's experience and his community's, punctuating it with Levi's experience in the Lager.

I remember here in passing, that the vilification of the prayer shawl is as old as anti-Semitism – from those shawls, taken from deportees, the SS would make underwear which was distributed to the Jews imprisoned in the Lager.

How to understand that image – the symbol of the humiliation of the Ghetto and the Lager? These phrases rivet the reader into the world that Ghettoization, Fascism, and Nazism made.

For the Ghetto shamed the Jews,
and the Lager branded them as subhuman.

What strategies could recuperate them?
Bring them out of traumatic repetitive
obsession-compulsion? To functioning
manhood, womanhood?

3. Ancestors and Argon

The first chapter, “Argon,” opens with a discussion of one of “*the so-called inert gases in the air we breathe.*” The beginning of the second paragraph quickly turns comparative, leading readers into the realm of metaphor.

First Levi characterizes the elements.

Like Argon, his ancestors were

so inert, so satisfied with their condition that they do not interfere in any chemical reaction, do not combine with any other element, and for precisely this reason have gone undetected for centuries.

*The little that I know about my ancestors
presents many similarities to these gases.*

These characteristics of Argon, especially its inertness, define his ancestors. He wonders if he too, like Argon, will be inert.

It can hardly be by chance that all the deeds attributed to them, though quite various, have in common a touch of the static, an attitude of dignified abstention, of voluntary (or accepted) relegation to the margins of the great river of life. Noble, inert, and rare: their history is quite poor when compared to that of other illustrious Jewish communities in Italy and Europe.

Comparing chemical elements and family history, *The Periodic Table* crystallizes an unusual combination for metaphor-making.

The connections between familial behavior and Argon, one of the most abundant elements of the Periodic Table - the stuff of autobiography and of science respectively- become entangled. The 21 elements, fundamental stuff of modern science, name the different episodes of this coming-of-age story.

4. The Hinge of the Narrative

The eleventh chapter focuses on the Lager.

This central hinge of the 21 chapters is entitled "Cerium," named for the flints Primo Levi takes from the chemistry lab of Buna-Auschwitz

And the flints, which he and his buddy-bunkmate Alberto scrape to fit the black-market cigarette lighters of the Lager, gain them two months of additional bread.

And then the Soviet soldiers liberate the Lager.

Recall that in the last chapter of his earlier book, *If This Is a Man*, Levi describes how these liberated survivors work together to find food, to cook it, eat it, rest. It is a moment of respite.

...we lay in a world of death and phantoms – but in Hut 14, there was singing.

Primo Levi and his colleagues in the scenes at the end of *If This Is A Man*, "The Story of Ten Days," evaded the death-vectors of Auschwitz by collaborating and constituting a cooperative social world in opposition to the Hobbesian war of all against all of the Nazi Lager.

Now we are on an upward trajectory: After the Lager chapter, each encounter with matter brings a small and steadily increasing success. In the chapters leading up to Cerium, there are a series of small catastrophes, now there are successes.

Yes, some of the new opportunities have a touch of the absurd, including the task of extracting from chicken shit the alloxan needed to make lipstick.

And then there is the story when two fleeing German pilots ask directions as to how to fly to Switzerland. In return they give his friend what they claim is uranium.

A small block of metal, about half a cigarette pack in size, actually quite heavy and with an exotic look.

The reflexes of the chemist lead Primo to test it. He discovers it is not uranium but cadmium. This time the substitution – unlike his experience in "Potassium" in the first half of the book, does not lead to an explosive mess, just a rueful discussion of how the end of the war has led to fictional accounts of heroic exploits.

5. The Carbon Connection

Grounded in first-person telling of the narrator's experience as he becomes a chemist and grows into manhood, Primo Levi reflects on his unfolding life-experiences.

And in the third-person narration the narrative elicits a series of coming-of-age accounts of a young middle-class Italian Jew.

To carbon, the element of life, my first literary dream was turned, insistently dreamed in an hour and a place when my life was not worth much, yes, I wanted to tell the story of an atom of carbon.

The retiring chemist can

*leaf through any treatise and memories rise up
...and while every element says something to
someone, and usually something different to
each...Carbon is an exception – because it
says everything to everyone.*

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The Journey of a Carbon Atom

A carbon atom, imprisoned for centuries
in limestone worthy of “the Catholic Hell,”
is liberated by a pickaxe. They are
*intermediaries in the millennial dialogue
between elements and man.*

For the moment of the liberation of the carbon atom the present tense of description is suited, rather than the past tense, which is narration.

Carbon is a singular element: it is the only element that can bind itself in long stable chains without a great expense of energy, and for life on earth (the only one we know so far) precisely long chains are required. Therefore, carbon is the key element of living substance.

We hear Primo speaking to us,
as the atom of carbon flies
three times around the world, until 1960,
when it enters the food chain and
enters a glass of milk,
which Primo drinks.

In his body the chain of which carbon is
the key element

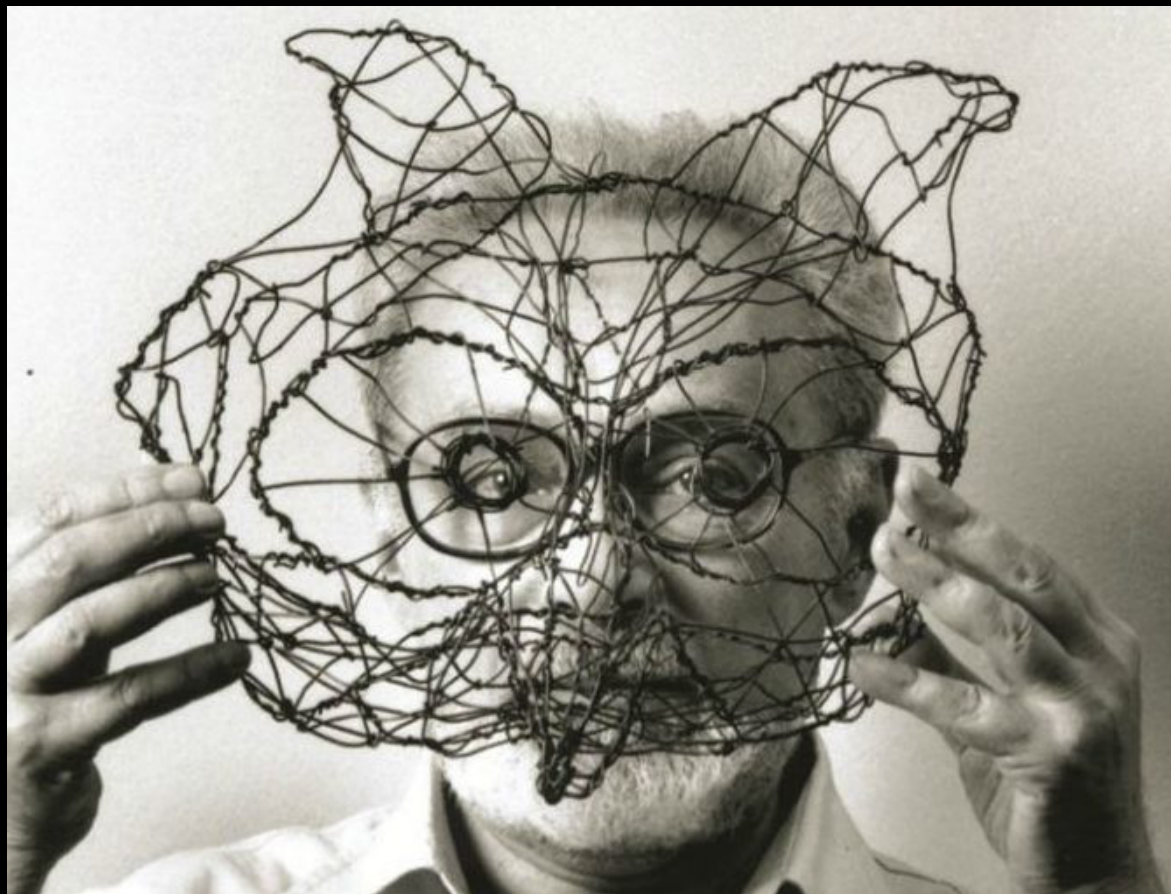
*enters the bloodstream, knocks at the door
of a nerve cell, and enters my brain, the
brain of the me who is writing, and the cell
in question, and within it the atom in
question, is in charge of my writing, in a
gigantic minuscule game which nobody
has yet described.*

This is now the organic chemistry of life:
and this atom

*at this instant, issuing out of a labyrinthine
tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run
along a certain path on the paper, mark it
with these volutes that are signs: a double
snap, up and down, between two levels of
energy, guides this hand of mine to impress
on the paper this dot, here, this one.*

Tucked away in this account, there is a subtext -- that of the Jews and modern civilization. For they have functioned as human compatriots of carbon, linking chains of cultural DNA, in intricate modes.

In his writing Levi speaks to us –
his writing is speaking –
the technology that has driven
our modern civilization as well
as our Jewish experience.

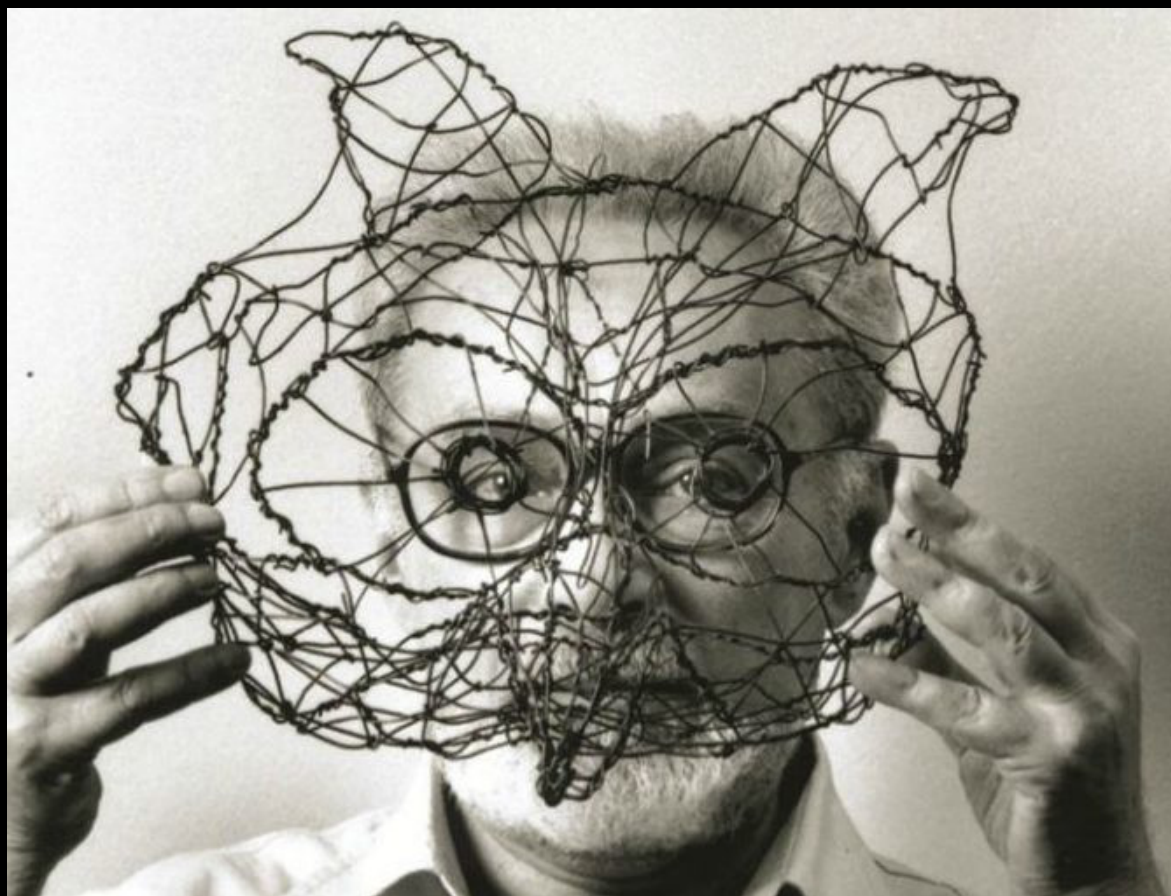


Centro Primo Levi New York – <http://primolevicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/levimaschera.jpg>

*Passerby, I don't ask you or others for forgiveness,
Or for prayers or tears or particular memory.
I ask only one thing: that this peace of mine will last,
Without new blood, filtering through the clods,
Penetrating down to me with its deadly warmth,
Waking to new sorrow these bones already now made stone.*

*Primo Levi
174517
1919–1987*





Centro Primo Levi New York – <http://primolevicenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/levimaschera.jpg>

Resources

Baumgarten, Murray. "Primo Levi, the Ghetto, Exile, the Lager, and *The Periodic Table*"
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